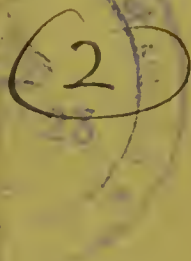


Morning Post, Jan.

23. 1912



BRITISH MUSEUM LIBRARY.

MR. SIDNEY LEE'S CRITICISMS.

Attention was drawn by a correspondent of the *Morning Post* last week to a number of reforms that he considered desirable in the administration of the British Museum Library. He referred particularly to the constitution of the Museum, to the mode of appointment of librarians, the need of a subject catalogue, the mode of purchase of old English and foreign books, the short hours during which the Library is available, and the preventible discomforts of the Reading Room. Mr. Sidney Lee, the editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, discussed the subject with a representative of this paper yesterday. "I have not had time," he said, "to devote much thought to the points raised by your correspondent, and we have here so much for which to be grateful to the Museum authorities that I speak only to aid any reasonable reform. I think it a favourable moment to discuss the question, because Dr. Kenyon, a man of the highest distinction, has recently become Director and commands universal confidence. He can well be relied upon to place the Library in a thoroughly efficient condition. As far as I can see, most of the required changes are of a purely administrative kind, and I believe that the Trustees, working with Dr. Kenyon, could give effect to all that is needful without any measure so strong as a Royal Commission.

"It certainly does look to me," Mr. Lee continued, "as though certain regulations of rather ancient date have been allowed to stand overlong without revision. What strikes me very much is the desirability of extending the time during which books can be procured during the winter months. The regulations as regards the use of artificial light are, as your correspondent says, quite antiquated. There is artificial light pretty well all over the Museum, and I doubt very much if its exclusion from the book stores could be justified in modern conditions. Not only are readers prevented from ordering books outside the galleries of the Reading Room during the winter months, but

on foggy days the ticket is sometimes brought back with the words "too dark." I should think it would be easy to devise means to meet the difficulties of the case without there being any real risk to the collection from fire. As to whether the Reading Room should be open till ten, it is a matter as to how much the public want it. When it was kept open until eight the members who used it were too few to justify the expense. There is not much evidence, however, available on the point."

NEWSPAPERS AT HENDON.

"Years ago I very strongly opposed the removal of the provincial newspapers to Hendon, and succeeded in staving it off for a time. If they are to be kept at all means should be devised to make them as accessible as possible. I think the present arrangement quite fails to make them as accessible as is desirable for the occasional consultation to which they are submitted. During the compilation of recent periods of the Dictionary of National Biography it has been very necessary frequently to consult the provincial papers, and I think a National Library should make provision for work of that kind. The present method, I understand, is that a cart on a certain day in the week (Wednesday, I believe) brings from the depository at Hendon any provincial newspapers that have been asked for since the previous Wednesday. Therefore six days may possibly elapse between your giving notice of your requirement and obtaining access to the newspaper. Such an arrangement seems to me very clumsy and cumbrous. I regard the provision of a periodical room as a very desirable reform, and I should like it to include the transactions of scientific societies and all the publications now classified under the very large and swollen heading of Academies."

FOREIGN BOOKS.

"There might, I think, be some better method of adding foreign books to the Library. I imagine it would be well to subdivide the subjects among a larger number of assistants who are linguists. In some researches I have made in early French literature and even in mediæval classical literature I have often been unable to find in the Library foreign monographs of reputed importance. It is rather a difficult topic owing to the immense number of foreign publications and the immense special knowledge required to deal with the whole output of the foreign press. I admit that outside committees of experts might even be necessary to treat foreign publications exhaustively. I think the arrangements for the acquisition of foreign books are rather better than they were a few years ago, and there is greater readiness to take external advice, which I feel sure would always be put most willingly at the disposal of the Museum authorities. There are several gaps in old foreign literature to be filled. But any

scheme requires no doubt a good deal of thought before it could be made to work."

THE SUBJECT CATALOGUE.

"The subject catalogue is a very huge undertaking, and I should not like to commit myself hastily to any positive opinion as to its practicability. Of its usefulness, were it practicable, there can be no doubt. It would enormously facilitate research and economise effort. I was on the committee which first considered in a general way the subject index of the London Library, which was carried out with wonderful rapidity and skill by the librarian, Dr. Hagberg Wright. Dr. Wright produced in four years with an organised staff a most serviceable subject index of more than 250,000 volumes. The British Museum Library contains nearly sixteen times as many volumes. It would, therefore, take to complete it, if the same method were applied, sixty-four years. Probably a subject index of the British Museum would, as Dr. Wright says in the preface to his subject index, have to be undertaken in sections. Mr. Fortescue's volumes are invaluable as far as they go, but I think it unfortunate that the Trustees should commit themselves to a declaration that his work should never go backward. To make 1880 the starting point for the subject index of a National Library can hardly be justified. With an adequate staff and organisation I should think it would be possible to deal with earlier periods by degrees as well as with the present and future periods."

TO THE EDITOR OF THE MORNING POST.

SIR,—I am very glad indeed that the question of a Subject Catalogue of the Library of the British Museum has been raised in your columns, and, with your permission, will add a few points to those already given in the article which has appeared.

The problem which is placed before the research student in the Reading Room of the British Museum is divided into two parts. He has first to ascertain what books have been written on his subject, and, secondly, to discover whether the Museum possesses such books. In order to find out the titles of books, he first has to search for a bibliography of the subject. This necessitates reference to a bibliography of bibliographies, such as Courtney's "Register of National Bibliography." If no bibliography can be discovered—and there are many subjects which even at this late date are without such guides to their literature—the student must consult the national or trade bibliographies of each country, which generally possess (at any rate, in the recent volumes) an index of subjects. Having accumulated laboriously a list of books, the list must then be compared with the General Catalogue of the British Museum, and the student will have made the first step towards his goal. But what happens in the case of a subject for which no bibliography exists, or for

which the bibliographies are so poor as to be almost useless? Let me give a concrete instance. A student is working at the question of the development of mines in France during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. If it is true (as I believe it to be) that the most recent bibliography of that subject was issued early in the Eighteenth Century, and, further, that the general bibliographies of French books for those periods, Georgi and Querard, have no subject indexes, what is the reader to do, except to work back from book to book and from reference to reference, a task which is laborious in the extreme? Again, what subject indexes are there to German books published before 1750 and between 1832 and 1870? None that I am aware of. To Italian books there is no subject index before 1835, except Haym's "Biblioteca Italiana," which only professes to deal with the rarer works. Similar remarks could be made as to the literature of many other countries, including Great Britain and the United States.

If a Subject Catalogue of the Library were in existence the student would be saved the whole of this difficult digging into bibliographies. Then the subject catalogue would tell him whether there was a bibliography of his subject, and he could proceed to collect the titles of the books not in the Library, and discover, by the aid of that invaluable work of Mr. R. A. Rye, the librarian of the University of London, "The Libraries of London," in which special library in London he would be likely to find more material. But the authorities at the British Museum insist that the research student must have a knowledge of bibliographical works before he is allowed to find out what they possess on any particular subject. It would be interesting to know how many books remain hidden and untouched on the shelves of the British Museum from year to year, simply for the reason that they do not occur in any bibliography, and the student is absolutely ignorant of their existence.

The whole of the preceding part of this letter relates, of course, to the period before 1880, the date when Mr. Fortescue's admirable indexes begin. Since that date there is little trouble in finding the titles of books that have been acquired by the Museum. But I should like to combat very strongly the idea that any large proportion of the serious students in the Reading Room are satisfied with the indexes to modern books and do not desire to know what the Museum possesses before 1880. I know many readers, and from inquiries I have made I learn that they are all in favour of a Subject Catalogue; they all consider that they have been considerably hampered in their work by the absence of such catalogue, and they all scorn the suggestion that they are likely to be hindered by the "overwhelming mass of titles."

May I, in conclusion, draw your readers' attention to two catalogues, which, in my opinion, support the case for a Subject Cata-

logue and prove that the only two reasons that can be urged against such a proposal are, first, want of money, and, secondly, insufficient staff, which two reasons are really one and the same? The first catalogue is that of the Surgeon-General's Library at Washington. This library contains the largest collection of medical books in the world, and the printed catalogue contains author and subject catalogues and an index to every article in every periodical in the library. The other catalogue I should like to refer to is the catalogue of books on the history of France in the Bibliothèque Nationale. This magnificent work, contained in twenty quarto volumes, with indexes of authors and anonymous works, is worthy of publication by any National Library. These two catalogues appear to me to answer any objections that may be urged on the score of multiplication of titles on any one subject. In the case of the medical library this trouble is met by making the headings as specific as possible, and the only criticism that might be made is that the titles under each subject might have been placed in chronological, rather than in alphabetical, order. This chronological arrangement is used in the French catalogue, together with a very elaborate, but perfectly easy, system of classification, which makes the "overwhelming mass of titles" less perceptible to the student.

It only remains for me to hope that the suggestions in your Correspondent's article may be carried into effect. He has shown that Dr. Garnett considered the proposal practicable, and pointed out methods for its carrying out. I believe that in the interests of British scholarship, and in the interests of research generally, it is the bounden duty of the Trustees to approach the Treasury with such a case for a Subject Catalogue as will induce them to make a special annual grant of such an amount as will lead to the work being finished within the next few years.—Yours, &c.,

R. A. PEDDIE.

St. Bride Foundation, Bride-lane, Jan. 22.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE MORNING POST.

SIR,—The two valuable articles in your paper on the British Museum Reading Room have raised questions which many readers, like myself, have long wished to see discussed. I have used the Library now for several years, and can personally bear witness to the very great courtesy and readiness to help the student and worker which is always shown by the staff. At the same time I cannot but feel that the strictures passed in these articles are well founded, and that probably nothing short of a small Royal Commission will avail to bring about the many improvements which could be, and some day will have to be, brought about.

The question of the periodicals is certainly important. At the present time practically no periodical can be seen less than six months after publication, and in general this period is much longer. Again, there

seems to be little method used in securing that the sets shall be kept complete. Often one is told that the agent or publisher has not sent some review or other for a long time past, though there is no reason for the omission, which is not found out till a reader needs a later number. The suggestion for a Periodical Room is certainly justified.

As to the opening of the Library till a later hour, your Correspondent has rather under-estimated his case. On ordinary days a general kind of shuffling unrest begins about 6.30, which culminates about 6.45 in what is practically a demand to give up one's books. It is understood that the hour for closing was altered from eight to seven o'clock, because of the small attendance; but this very hour is just that in which a great number of people will be having their evening meal. The small attendance in this hour is no index to the numbers who would use the room from eight to ten. The principle underlying the hours of opening surely is that a valuable collection (or plant, to put it commercially) like this should be worked to its utmost capacity.

That in the winter months readers should be cut off from practically the whole Library at 3.30 is an utter absurdity if it is to be justified on the plea that hand-lamps would be dangerous. The real reason for this and the earlier closing, of course, is the question of expenditure. It is rather childish to put forward pretexts rather than honest statements. On Saturday, moreover, the only day on which many can use the Library, the book supply is cut off a quarter of an hour earlier.

Finally, I might suggest that a better method of lighting could be devised for the Reading Room; the present system is destructive of the eyesight, and a sore trial.—Yours, &c.,

NIKTO.

Jan. 22.
